

# STRETCH YOUR FOOD BUDGET WITH STAMPS

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Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups (CWAG)

Do you often find that by the end of the month you don't have enough money left to pay for all the groceries you need? Have you ever had to decide between paying for your medicine or utilities and paying for food? Are you embarrassed at being seen at the checkout counter with food stamps? Take heart, Wisconsin now has a new system - you simply use a "swipe" card that looks like a debit or credit card. So it's nobody's business but yours.

Wisconsin's Benefit Specialists, reached through your county's aging unit, are eager to help you pursue every program for which you may be entitled. That includes food stamps. But only 40 % of older people who qualify for food stamps actually apply for and use them. Yet they can greatly help to maintain health and the sense of well being that comes with eating well.

Food stamps can be used for fresh or canned fruit and vegetables, milk, cheese, butter, bread, cereal, meat, fish, rice, and pastas, to name a few. They can also be used to purchase special diet foods, such as salt-free or sugar-free products. Every household that qualifies is entitled to **at least** \$10 per month of food stamps -- that's \$120 a year in extra grocery money.

There are many misunderstandings about food stamps. Here are some of the facts: > > >

**FACT:** You do not have to be on welfare (W-2) or have young children to get food stamps. *The food stamp program is the only kind of public assistance offered to lower-income people by the federal government regardless of age or health.*

**FACT:** Even individuals who are working may qualify for food stamps. *There is a 20% deduction plus many other income deductions that can help working people qualify.*

**FACT:** Only younger people applying for food stamps must also be seeking work. *Older people are not required to go out and find a job in order to qualify for food stamps.*

**FACT:** Food stamps do not have to be used only for special health foods. They can be used for a large range of food normally eaten by most people. They can also be used at meal sites or as a donation for home-delivered meals.

**FACT:** Individuals can qualify for both SSI and food stamps *and the amount of food stamps you receive will not affect your SSI amount at all.*

**FACT:** It should not be difficult to apply for food stamps. Your County Benefit Specialist can help you to be sure you qualify so the process will be that much simpler when you apply at the social service office. *If you cannot go in person, you may appoint an "authorized representative" to apply for you.*

**FACT:** The food stamp application process is fast. *The agency must determine whether you are eligible and see that you get your food stamps within 30 days of applying. In emergencies you can get food stamps within five days.* > > >

FACT: One individual receiving food stamps does not take away benefits from another -- *everyone who qualifies is entitled to food stamps.*

Applying is easy and fast. You can ask to have an application mailed to you or you can write a note authorizing a relative or friend to apply for you. Within 30 days, you should receive your Food Stamps Quest card, which works like a bank debit card. Every month the state electronically puts your allotted amount of food stamp dollars into your account. You hand your card to the cashier at check-out who will then "swipe" it to pay for your groceries.

To qualify, a household with an individual aged 60 or older may have no more than \$3,000 in assets (not counting a house), a car worth \$4,650 or less and certain other exempt assets. (The car may be totally exempt if used for work or for going to doctor's appointments). There are many deductions from any income received, such as those for medical costs, any wages, rent or house taxes, insurance, home repair and utilities. Every elderly individual with income of \$687 per month or less, or an elderly couple with income of \$922 per month or less, even without any deductions, will qualify for at least \$10 per month (\$120 per year) of food stamps. (Note: these figures change every October.)

If you think you qualify, call your County Benefit Specialist for a private and confidential interview. And if you have a friend you think might qualify, pass this information along. Do apply for benefits to which you are entitled, especially an important benefit like food stamps that can help you improve your health and your life. *And only you will know!*